

# WARHAMMER 40,000



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ALUNDRA WAS RUNNING, feet pounding on the dirt-covered road. She'd run everywhere all her life, always in a hurry. This way and that. Always being told to calm down – to stop and take a breath. She couldn't stop today. No one could, not if they wanted to live.

She turned a corner, tearing into a paved side alley, the soles of her sandals slipping on the slick flagstones. Something wet. She didn't look down to see what it was, didn't want to know.

Seventeen years she'd lived in the township. Her entire life. She knew every corner, recognised every sound: the chirp of the birds, the braying of the grox in the fields to the south, the clamour of market day. Not today. Today there were no birds, no bustle – only screams and explosions and the incessant rattle of shots being fired.

There had been raids before. Of course there had. Perversely, the attacks had become just as much a part of life as the daily grind of washing and cleaning. They had learned how to deal with them, the people of Sandran. At first sight of the invaders, a bell would sound, the streets clearing immediately. The rich would make for their bunkers, the poor to whichever crumbling hab they called home. Raid shutters nailed against windows, families huddling together in the dark, praying that they wouldn't be found.

Alundra could still remember her first time. A strange brew of absolute terror and the comforting smell of her mother, drawing her in tight and whispering gently in her ear: It will be over soon, my darling, just you see.

So many memories. Cautiously emerging onto the streets when the danger had passed, assessing the damage.

Clearing away the bodies.

So many bodies.

She'd seen her first corpse at the age of six, running into her aunt's hab after a raid and discovering that one of the monsters had materialised behind the shutters, within the imagined safety of the four walls.

Alundra had lost count of how many raids there had been since then. How many sleepless nights cringing in the darkness, listening to the screams.

But this time was different. This time, everyone was going to die.

There had been no peal, no warning. Just the roar of engines in the sky.

The Flayers were close behind, drawn to bloodshed like dust moths to a flame.

Her grandfather had warned them when she was just a kid. The old man had found Alundra fighting her brother one blazing summer afternoon, the two of them trying to claw each other's eyes out. There hadn't been a raid in two years, maybe three. Grandfather's calloused hands had pulled her from Husim, still kicking and screaming. It wasn't anything unusual. Husim and Alundra were always scrapping, too similar in temperament. Headstrong. Stubborn.

It had been the first time she'd ever heard Grandfather raise his voice.

'Don't you realise what you're doing? The Flayers can sense violence from two systems away. Do you want to bring them back, risk another raid?'

'That's rubbish,' Husim had sneered, full of childish arrogance. 'They don't exist. Galeb says. It's all lies.'

That night the bell sounded. All four generations of the family next door were slain. Husim and Alundra promised never to fight again.

As if that was ever going to happen.

Where was he? Alundra had already tried two of her brother's usual hangouts. One had been abandoned; the other had already been raided. She couldn't identify the remains, but the clothes didn't look like Husim's, even under all that gore.

Behind her, Alundra could hear the heavy tramp of booted feet, the all-too-familiar bark of handguns. They were close. Too close. She took a corner fast,

belting down the narrow gap between two shops. There was an alley behind the buildings. She could avoid the main roads, make her way to Torin's place. If he couldn't come home, Husim would have gone there, probably dragging hapless Galeb with him.

'Frag, no.'

Alundra skidded to a halt, kicking up a plume of dust. A dead-end; tall redbrick buildings boxing her in. How could she have gone the wrong way? She ran over to the far wall, trying the solitary door's handle. Locked. Of course it was. There were a couple of windows on the upper levels, but was it worth chancing the old pipes that snaked down to a heap of old barrels in the corner? No, she should head back to the main streets, get her bearings. Time was running out.

Alundra spun on her heels and felt the blood freeze in her veins. A ghoul stood in the entrance to the alleyway, swaying back and forth, hungry red eyes fixed on her. It seemed to be waiting for her to make the next move, the noonday sun reflecting off what little of its metal frame was exposed. Its grimacing skull was still visible, as was a blood-smeared chestplate and long, knife-like fingers. The rest of its body was bound tightly in gory strips of human skin. Some of bands looked old, like brittle leather baked in the sun, while others looked disturbingly fresh, edges caked in rapidly drying blood.

A Flayer.

Alundra had heard the name during her first raid. Grandfather had gathered her near, gently explaining what they were hiding from.

'They are daemons, my child, mechanical devils forged from steel and fury. They come to Sandran for one reason and one reason alone – to gorge on any living soul they encounter. They exist only to feed a hunger that can never be sated.'

Even as a child the very idea had seemed illogical.

'But they are machines, Grandfather,' Alundra had pointed out. 'They don't need to eat, do they?' The old man had merely shaken his head sadly. He didn't answer all of her questions that day. She'd asked where they'd come from, but he said he didn't know, no one did. She asked what happened to the bodies of their victims. He'd just sent her to help her mother, but not before warning her

that they would strike again. The inevitability in his voice was more chilling than the stories of the ghouls themselves.

It was only later she discovered how the Flayers earned their name – how the lifeless raiders wore the skins of their victims on their metal backs, a trophy for every kill. Some went even further, carrying exuviated torsos as grisly standards, testament to their madness.

Perhaps he had been trying to protect what little of her innocence was left. Maybe he had been right to try. Three years later she glimpsed a Flayer through a gap in the raid shutters, watching in horror as it shaved the skin from the medikai as easily as someone might peel an apple. From that day on, her nightmares were filled with tarnished skeletons appearing from nowhere. That was the thing that actually scared her the most. Not the butchery itself, but the fact that the Flayers simply shimmered into being. No spaceships descending from on high or smouldering drop pods crashing to earth. These mechanical devils just materialised from thin air, flensing talons scraping together in fevered anticipation.

Just like the abomination standing before her.

The Flayer cocked its head one way and then other, as if trying to ease out a crick in its neck, the fractured skulls it wore as a belt clattering as it swayed.

Who's going to make the first move? Alundra asked herself, amazed she was even capable of rational thought in such a situation. Who's going to run?

Time seemed to slow down, seconds stretching into minutes, hours, before she realised what she was going to do. She had always been fast, but could she outrun a Flayer? Only one way to find out.

Alundra feinted to the left as if she was going to attempt to run past it. The ghoul responded how she had hoped, racing forward to intercept, claws outstretched.

The gambit paid off, a move perfected over years of playing ball games with her brother and his friends, having to match their strength with cunning and fast feet. She immediately doubled back, racing for the barrels. She leapt on top of the containers, grabbing for the perilous drainpipe.

Realising its mistake, the Flayer dived towards her, talons closing around

Alundra's ankle. She screamed as the Flayer yanked, the rusty metal of the pipe stripping the skin from her palms as she slipped back down.

Kicking back with her free leg, Alundra somehow managed to find the Flayer's head, although her thin, leather sole was little use against a living metal skull. The raider grabbed at her, one of its claws piercing the back of her calf, not deep, but enough to remind her that this was a battle she could never win.

She would die here, in a litter-strewn alley, a crazed raider carving her up like a cheap grox steak. Worst of all, she would never see her brother again.

The alleyway erupted with the thunder of gunfire. Alundra felt the robot's claws whip away, looking down to see the Flayer flatten against the wall, shells punching into its body in quick succession. She followed the line of fire to its source, a giant stomping into the alleyway, an excessively large bolter held steady in a gloved hand. Her saviour was clad head-to-toe in heavy monochrome power armour, a winged skull emblazoned across a monumental chest. A similar death's head was displayed on its bone-white pauldron, this skull painted over a pair of crossed ebony scythes.

The Death Spectres, another name whispered by Grandfather all those years ago; a chapter of Space Marines, dedicated to protecting humanity from the terrors of the Ghoul Stars. No, that wasn't right. Dedicated to protect the Imperium. There was a difference.

Whatever its mission, Alundra offered a prayer of thanks to the Angel of Death's God Emperor. Just because she didn't believe in Him didn't mean He wouldn't listen. He might even deliver her from this madness, transport her far away from the vengeful Space Marine and the Flayer that was dancing like a deranged marionette under the Death Spectre's onslaught.

'Alundra. This way!'

She looked up, amazed not just to hear her name but also to recognise the voice that said it.

'Husim?'

Her brother was leaning out of the window above her, a toned arm reaching down. 'Keep climbing.'

Alundra didn't need telling twice. As the Space Marine emptied its weapon into the stricken Flayer Alundra climbed, ignoring the pain from her palms and calf. The pipe creaked under her weight and with a sickening ping started to pull away from the brickwork. As it arched back, she threw up her hand, finding her brother, and let herself be hauled up.

Her fingernails scraped against the stone sill as she scrambled for a hold. Husim leant further out of the window, grabbed the thin material at the back of her tunic and pulled her through. They tumbled to the floor on the other side. She was inside. She was safe.

The bolter fire had ceased.

'I need to see,' she exclaimed, scrabbling back up to the window.

'Alundra, wait!' Husim made a grab for her, but she shook it off, almost throwing herself back over the sill in her haste. The Flayer lay on the floor, twitching where it had fallen. As if the punishment hadn't been severe enough, the Death Spectre raised its grinding chainsword and severed the raider's head in one practised move. The metal skull rolled away from the decapitated torso, coming to rest face up, staring straight at Alundra. Their eyes locked for a second, before the lights beneath the Flayer's heavy brow flared and extinguished forever.

She became aware of another set of eyes upon her. The Death Spectre pointed its chainsword up at the window, uttering a single, solemn command.

'Stay where you are.'

Husim pulled her away from the window. 'What are you waiting for?' he shouted. 'Come on. We're upstairs.'

Dazed, Alundra dragged her eyes away from the Space Marine and limped after her brother.

'This way. Quickly.'

Husim grabbed her hand, guiding her down a corridor and through a storeroom. The place was crammed with sacks of grain and empty wooden trays. They were above the bakery.

‘What are you doing here?’ she asked, as her brother ushered her up a stairwell.

‘Hiding, what do you think?’

She took the stairs two at a time, coming up into a sawdust-covered room stacked with boxes from wall to wall.

‘Are you alone?’

‘No. Galeb’s here too,’ Husim said, following her.

‘What about Torin?’

Husim simply barged past, ignoring the question.

‘Galeb needs your help.’

‘He’s hurt?’

‘See for yourself.’

Husim pushed back the tattered curtain that was covering a doorway at the back of the room.

‘What happened?’ Alundra asked, rushing over to the boy lying on the floor. Yes, she knew that she should think of Galeb as a man now, but he’d always be her little brother’s playmate, getting into scrapes and always coming out the worst.

But never as bad as this

‘One of them got Torin,’ Galeb wheezed, breaking into a wet, hacking cough.

‘The idiot tried to stop it,’ Husim said, his voice wavering despite the tough talk. ‘Got slashed across the belly for his trouble.’

‘It was killing him,’ Galeb argued, wincing as he tried to push himself up.

‘He was already dead,’ replied Husim, flatly.

Alundra examined the blood-soaked shirts wrapped around Galeb’s stomach.

‘You did this?’ she asked her brother.

‘It was all we had,’ Husim snapped back. ‘I had to think quick.’

‘You did well,’ Alundra said, trying to still her brother’s defensiveness. ‘But we’re going to need to find more supplies if we’re going to get him out of here. Proper bandages.’ She glanced around the room. There was a small pile of food in the corner, a couple of loaves, some migan fruits and a few nuts. It wouldn’t last them long.

‘We can’t go back out there.’

Alundra fixed Husim with a look that told him he was being stupid. ‘We have to.’

‘No way,’ Husim insisted, pacing back to the curtain and checking the room outside. ‘We’re safe here. We’ll wait until the raid is over and then we’ll get him home. Mother will know what to do.’

Alundra felt tears prick her eyes. She knew she should tell him why that wasn’t possible, that Mother was no longer waiting at home, but it wouldn’t have helped. He’d stick his heels in even further.

‘He’s right, Alundra,’ Galeb wheezed, grabbing her arm with a trembling hand. ‘If we head outside, we’ll be taken.’

Alundra looked up into the rafters, feeling a cool breeze across her face, cool against the stifling heat of the small room. She could just make out a hole in the ceiling. There must be an attic above them, maybe a way out onto the roof. Not that Galeb was in any fit state to clamber up and out of the building.

She closed her eyes for a second, letting the draft wash over her. She wished Grandfather were here. He’d know what to say, how to persuade the boys.

She squeezed Galeb’s hand, forcing a smile. ‘Listen to me, both of you. We’ve got to keep moving. Everyone is gathering in the town hall. They’re going to find a way of getting us out of this.’

Husim snorted. ‘What are they going to do? Reason with them?’

‘They’re going to try,’ she snapped back. ‘Better that than hiding in darkened rooms.’

‘That’s what we always do,’ Galeb pointed out, his voice catching with the pain.

‘This time is different,’

‘Yeah,’ snorted Husim. ‘This time the ghouls aren’t the problem.’

Alundra sighed, stood and walked back to her brother, placing her hand on his shoulder, giving it a squeeze in the same way Mother always had when she tried to get through to him.

It was amazing how soon you started thinking of someone in the past tense.

‘We’ve got to move Galeb.’

‘And how do we do that, genius?’ he asked, shrugging her off.

‘We’ll carry him. If we’re careful—’

A noise from below cut her off.

‘What’s that?’ Galeb whimpered, only to be told to shut up from Husim who peeked around the curtain.

‘There’s nothing there.’

‘It’s coming from downstairs,’ Galeb insisted, fixing Alundra with a panicked stare.

Footsteps.

They weren’t alone in the building. It could have been the baker, of course – if the baker had started wearing exceptionally heavy boots.

‘Husim...’ Alundra hissed, willing her brother to make the right decision.

‘OK, OK,’ he finally agreed, throwing his hands up in surrender. ‘There’s a hole in the wall in the far room. We can crawl through to the next building.’

‘I won’t be able to,’ Galeb sobbed.

‘You’ll have to,’ Husim insisted, moving over to his friend. ‘Put your arm around me and keep it quiet, will you?’

Alundra crept over to the little food Husim had scavenged, trying not to make too much noise as she shoved it into her brother’s leather satchel.

The stairs creaked.

‘It’s coming up,’ Galeb snivelled, drawing a glare from Husim. The three of them froze, staring at the thin curtain, as they listened to the hydraulic pumps hissing with every step.

Should have got them to move straight away, Alundra scolded herself. Stupid. They could have been out of the building by now, heading to the town hall.

Whoever was on the other side of the curtain stopped. Alundra glanced at her brother, Galeb’s arm around his shoulder, his own hand looped around his friend’s waist, holding him close. Galeb’s eyes were so wide they looked like he was no longer blinking.

Then, above them, something moved. Wood creaked. Metallic limbs glinted over their heads.

Alundra yelled a warning, forgetting about keeping quiet. Husim looked up to the ceiling and tried to pull his friend to the side, but it was too late. The Flayer dropped down from the rafters, landing on top of Galeb. Husim was shoved back, cracking his head on the far brickwork before slumping to the floor.

Galeb screamed as the monster’s tapered claws pushed deep into his belly. The cry was replaced by the sound of someone choking on their own blood as the raider yanked free a handful of intestines and attempted to cram the fresh meat into metal jaws that couldn’t even open. The entrails spilled through its fingers, slopping back down onto Galeb’s convulsing body.

Trapped behind the Flayer, Husim threw himself forward, slamming against the metal body, trying to shove the ghoul from Galeb. The Flayer merely thrust out a hand, claws puncturing Husim’s chest, pinning him against the wall.

Alundra looked around, frantically searching for something to use as a weapon. A water pipe ran around the foot of the wall. She gripped it hard, the rusted surface cutting into already punished hands, and yanked. It shifted, but not enough. She dropped down, pressing a foot against the wall and heaved again. Once, twice, until finally it came away from the wall.

Screeching like a banshee she rushed forward, bringing her makeshift quarterstaff down on the skin-covered back. It connected sharply with the ghoul's exo-skeleton, sending vibrations shooting back up her arms, almost forcing her to drop the pipe. But she carried on battering the living robot, screaming in fury with every strike.

The attack was short-lived. With a hiss of annoyance, the Flayer turned, slashing out with bloodied claws, and swatted her aside. Gashes opened cleanly across her side and she was propelled headfirst into the wall. The pipe clattering across the floor, Alundra threw up her hands to protect herself, the skin tearing from her arms as she skidded down the bricks.

She landed in a crumpled heap, reeling from shock and pain, her head spinning. Husim's screams seemed to be coming from all directions at once.

'Leave him, abomination, and feel the Emperor's teeth.'

A shadow fell over Alundra, a giant figure pushing its way into the tiny room, ripping the curtain from its pole, chainsword held aloft and growling like a mechanical hound. Her saviour from the alley. The Death Spectre.

The Flayer whirled around, flinging Husim aside, but it was already too late. The chainsword bit into the Flayer's shoulder plate, cleaving the monstrosity in two in a blaze of coruscating sparks.

Alundra scabbled behind the Space Marine, gathering Husim into her arms, trying to gauge how badly he was hurt. Her brother's chest was a spider's web of lacerations, each ebbing dark, treacle-like blood. His eyes were rolling in their sockets, his body going into shock. She shouted his name, trying to get him to stay with her.

'You must come with me,' a reverberant voice growled above her. The Space Marine was looming over her, its power armour splattered with gore and oil. 'Leave the boy.'

Alundra all but snarled at her rescuer. 'He's my brother.'

The Death Spectre reached out a gauntleted hand and pushed her aside to examine Husim, the Angel of Death's touch gentler than Alundra had expected.

'The injuries are severe,' the hulking figure concluded categorically. 'He will not survive.'

'He won't if we leave him here,' she snapped back, her fury giving her courage she never knew she possessed. The Space Marine could snap her neck in an instant, but she didn't care anymore. There was no hope of rescuing Galeb, trampled beneath the Flayer's bisected corpse, but she wasn't going to abandon her brother.

A shower of sawdust rained down from above. The fight had attracted more ghouls, hoping to scavenge carrion. Three of the creatures were attempting to claw their way through the hole in the ceiling, stuck halfway in their haste. It wouldn't take long for them to burst through. The ceiling was already bulging, cracks spreading as they struggled, consumed with blood lust.

'Get out,' the Death Spectre barked, snatching his mag-locked bolter from his leg and firing into the Flayers, the report of the gun like thunder in the enclosed space. 'Get out now!'

Alundra grabbed Husim, ignoring his screamed protestations and bundled him out of the room even as the ceiling gave way. Behind her, flensing claws squealed against ceramite armour.

Alundra didn't look back.

'We're nearly there,' Alundra coaxed, half carrying her brother down the back stairs to the ground floor. She'd slipped twice, Husim landing painfully on her own injuries. There was no time to rest. It sounded as if the building was about to come down around them.

'Hurts,' Husim whined, sounding like the child she had known growing up. 'Really bad.'

'I know, Hu, but you've got to help me. We can do this together.'

‘Okay, Ma,’ Husim replied weakly, at least attempting to put one foot in front of the other. Alundra didn’t correct his mistake.

The stairs ended in another storage area, crammed with mops and buckets. She struggled over to the door, praying that it wouldn’t be locked, that they wouldn’t be trapped here. She could hear talons skittering on floorboards above. Perhaps even an Angel of Death hadn’t been strong enough to hold back a flood of ravenous Flayers. A renewed volley of bolter fire told her differently. If the Space Marine could keep the Flayer busy she might still be able to get Husim to a semblance of safety.

She twisted the handle, cursing as the door wouldn’t budge. Hefting her brother, she put her shoulder to it, offering thanks to a Throne she still didn’t believe in when it shifted in the frame. Just stiff. They could still get out of this. She tried again and it sprang open, nearly sending them sprawling across the bakery’s tiled kitchen.

Outside she could hear concussive blasts and the deafening howl of transports thundering through the air. The evacuation had already started.

‘This way,’ she said, guiding Husim around a large wooden preparation table and into the passageway. There was a heavy thud from above, knocking plaster from the ceiling. Husim had stopped responding, but at least was allowing himself to be mindlessly led by his sister. ‘Not long now,’ she lied.

Something crashed down the stairs, clattering into the buckets and trays.

‘Just keep going,’ she said, barrelling into a narrow corridor that led out to the street, unsure if she was encouraging herself or Husim. ‘A few more steps, that’s all.’

They reached the door. They were going to get out. Shifting Husim’s weight, she reached forward, pulling on the handle. It didn’t move. She panicked, her heart thudding in her chest. Why wasn’t it moving? Then the realisation dawned. Push to open. She laughed at the ridiculousness of the situation, and shoved at the metal door. It swung open easily; too easily. Alundra and her brother tumbled forward, Husim’s legs giving way, dragging her down. The two of them splayed on the floor, Husim crying out. It was the last sound she’d ever hear him make.

Alundra groaned, her wounds, shallow though they were, burning like a furnace

in her side. She looked up, realising that she was staring at melanoid boots that crunched on the dirt as they turned. She cast her eyes skywards, squinting in the sun, not one but two unmistakable silhouettes above her.

‘No,’ Alundra cried out, trying to throw herself over Husim as armoured fingers pulled her roughly back to her feet.

‘Superficial wounds,’ rumbled a red-helmed Death Spectre, yanking her arm up to examine the dark stain spread across her tunic. ‘Scan her, Quintus.’

‘At once, Sergeant Vilda.’

Alundra tried to wriggle free but the sergeant just stood as immovable as a statue, its brother sweeping a handheld augury up and down the length of her body. The device buzzed and chirped as the results scrolled on a screen.

‘She is surprisingly well-nourished, sir. No known maladies or infections,’ the Death Spectre called Quintus reported, looking up from the augury. ‘Safely within selection parameters.’

Her captor nodded. ‘Excellent. She will be taken with the others.’

Alundra fought against Vilda’s grip. ‘What about my brother? You need to help him.’

The Death Spectre released her, and she tumbled back into the dirt, instinctively reaching out to touch Husim. He was so still.

Quintus didn’t even check his scanner.

‘Subject rejected,’ he intoned. ‘Injuries fatal.’

‘No,’ Alundra yelled, springing back to her feet and pounding her fists against the Space Marine’s chest, no longer caring if such actions were tantamount to a death sentence. ‘You’ve got to do something. He can’t die.’

The red-helmeted sergeant grabbed her arm once again, but this time the fingers bit deeper, bruising muscle, making her cry out.

‘And spirited too,’ he commented, sounding what, amused? She wanted to kill

both of them.

From the passage behind them, a voice rumbled out, agreeing with the sentiment. Alundra twisted to see her saviour marching down the restricted space of the corridor, his pauldrons scraping against the narrow walls. As he stepped out into the sun, Alundra couldn't help but stare. The Space Marine had lost his helm in the battle, revealing a stark visage, almost completely devoid of pigment. The skin was corpse white, with closely cropped hair the colour of snow and eyes as red as the blood that flowed freely from a fresh wound across his pale cheek.

'She took on a Flayed one single-handedly,' he reported, almost sounding proud. 'Strength of will as well as body. Unusual for a human.'

'Then we have chosen well, Karnos,' Vilda replied, shoving Alundra towards the albino. 'Prime stock. Take her to the transport.'

'Wait,' Alundra pleaded, as Karnos clutched her arms tightly. 'I'll go with you, as long as you take my brother too.'

Vilda reached forwards, grabbing her cheeks between thumb and forefinger.

'Listen to me, girl,' the Death Spectre snarled. 'If it were up to me you would all burn. Too many of my brothers have been lost rescuing you from these unholy aberrations.'

'Sergeant Vilda,' Quintus warned, glancing up the road. 'Another wave of necrons approaching...'

But Vilda didn't acknowledge his battle-brother. 'The Megir has ordered we select the best specimens from your settlement, those strong and healthy enough to bear future generations who might join the ranks of the Death Spectres.'

Prime stock. Vilda's early comment replayed in her mind, filling her with a deeper horror than the Flayers had ever induced.

'Suitable colonies are few and far between this far from the heart of the Imperium. An Exterminatus order has been issued and you will be taken to a suitable breeding world near Occludus. A glorious future awaits, girl. You will serve your Emperor well.'

Behind her, Karnos released one of her arms to fire into the approaching Flayers. It was the chance Alundra had been waiting for, a distraction she could use to escape, but the fight had gone, stripped as easily as the ghouls could have flensed her skin.

‘Sir,’ Quintus prompted, ‘we should make for the extraction point.’

‘Agreed,’ Vilda acknowledged, pushing Alundra’s face away sharply. Her head cracked painfully against Karnos’s chestplate. ‘Bring her.’

Alundra didn’t struggle as Karnos plunked her from her feet. Instead she stared into the glazing eyes of her brother as he lay in the rampaging necrons’ path, bleeding out in the baking sun.